

FEATURED OF LOVE FLOWER SINGING IN LANG'S LAND

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ABSTRACT

Hat Hoa Tinh is a unique type of love-making folk song of the Tay people in Trang Dinh district, Lang Son province. It is a type of folk performing art with many unique features in performance, language and music. Along with the process of cultural exchange between ethnic groups in the border areas, Hoa Tinh singing, although not widely spread throughout the Tay and Nung communities, once flourished with the Zhuang people in Guangxi province (China). However, Hat Hoa Tinh is currently facing the risk of extinction due to many objective and subjective reasons. Therefore, the urgent task of cultural preservation requires specific strategies to preserve cultural values associated with the spiritual life of people here.

Keywords: Lang's Land, Hat Hoa Tinh, Tay People, Nung People, Zhuang People.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hat Hoa Tinh is a form of antiphonal singing (courtship singing) practiced by the Tay ethnic group in Lang Son province. Alongside other singing styles such as *Luon Shuong*, *Luon Then*, and *Luon Còi*, which are common among the Tay people across the Northeastern region of Vietnam, *Hat Hoa Tinh* stands out as a distinctive genre specific to the borderland area adjacent to China.

It can be affirmed that *Hat Hoa Tinh* is not exclusive to the border region of Lang Son. This genre is also performed by the Tay people in several border communes of Cao Bang province during local markets or cultural exchange performances between Vietnam and China. The emergence of *Hat Hoa Tinh* serves as concrete evidence of the cultural interaction and mutual influence among ethnic groups residing in border areas, particularly among the Tay and Nung (Vietnam) and the Zhuang (China).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Within the scope of this study, the author conducted ethnographic fieldwork and surveys focusing on the subject of research, specifically in areas inhabited by the Tay people who practice *Hat Hoa Tinh*. Relevant secondary sources concerning the cultural and artistic exchange of the Tay ethnic group in the borderland were collected and reviewed. In addition, interviews were conducted with local artisans, and live performances of *Hat Hoa Tinh* were observed and analyzed.

The research employed a combination of methodologies, including document analysis, literature review, ethnographic fieldwork, and in-depth interviews. Through these methods, data were systematically gathered and examined to serve the objectives of this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. An Overview of *Hat Hoa Tinh* among the Tay People in Lang Son Province

Trang Dinh is a mountainous district located in the northern part of Lang Son Province. It comprises several communes that border the Vietnam–China boundary. Due to its strategic geographical location, this region serves as a vital transportation and trade hub within the Cao–Bac–Lang area (Cao Bang – Bac Kan – Lang Son). As a center of cross-border exchange, Trang Dinh has attracted diverse waves of migration, resulting in a multiethnic population, predominantly composed of the Tay and Nung ethnic groups. Geopolitically, Trang Dinh borders Na Ri District (Bac Kan Province) to the west, Binh Gia and Van Lang Districts (Lang Son Province) to the south, Chongzuo City (Guangxi Province, China) to the east, and Thach An District (Cao Bang Province) to the north [7]. These border proximities have fostered intense cultural exchange between the Tay communities of Trang Dinh (Lang Son), Thach An (Cao Bang), and the linguistically affiliated Zhuang ethnic group residing along the Chinese side of the border in Guangxi. The cultural diversity resulting from migration and acculturation has given rise to *Hat Hoa Tinh*, a unique form of antiphonal singing, enriching the Tay cultural identity in Trang Dinh.

The Tay–Nung communities in Lang Son exhibit a profound appreciation for cultural and artistic expressions. This cultural affinity is reflected in their daily life, as well as in traditional rituals such as weddings, festivals, and market fairs in upland areas. Their repertoire of antiphonal folk singing is remarkably rich, including styles such as *Luon Then*, *Luon*, *Hat Còi*, and *Phong Shur*, each with distinct performance practices. Notably, in Trang Dinh (Lang Son), Thach An (Cao Bang), and Guangxi (China), *Hat Hoa Tinh* emerges as a particularly unique and characteristic genre.

Although *Hat Hoa Tinh* is not widely disseminated, it is cherished by Tay communities in selected border-adjacent localities along the Vietnam–China frontier. The term “*Luon*” in the Tay language translates to “singing,” as seen in terms such as *Luon Shrong*, *Luon Còi*, *Luon Then*, *Luon Nang Hai*, and *Luon Nang Oi*. Consequently, the local population sometimes refers to *Hat Hoa Tinh* as *Luon Hoa Tinh* [2, 5].

The cultural hybridity embraced by borderland communities has enabled *Hat Hoa Tinh* to develop into a form of courtship singing that serves as a vehicle for cultural exchange between the two nations. In Guangxi (China), *Hat Hoa Tinh* is extensively performed by the Zhuang people. In contrast, in Vietnam, the genre is limited to the Tay people residing in areas contiguous with Guangxi. Despite gaining popularity within these communities, its distribution remains geographically constrained and largely oriented toward facilitating cross-cultural interactions between Vietnam and China. This observation suggests that *Hat Hoa Tinh* likely originated in China before being adopted and localized by Tay communities in Vietnam.

3.2. Characteristics of *Hát Hoa Tinh* in Lạng Sơn Province

3.2.1. Lyric Characteristics

One prominent characteristic of *Hát Hoa Tinh* among the Tày people is the poetic nature of the lyrics. In general Vietnamese folk culture, poetry—whether in the form of the traditional *lục bát* (six-eight syllable verse), *thất ngôn trường thiên* (seven-word long-form poetry), or *tứ tuyệt* (quatrain)—serves as the foundation for various forms of singing, storytelling, and even letter writing.

Similarly, the lyrics of *Hát Hoa Tình* are composed in poetic verse, primarily focusing on themes of romantic love. These lyrics are typically tender, profound, and emotionally expressive, often utilizing metaphorical and refined language. *Hát Hoa Tình* frequently involves playful banter between performers, aiming to amuse both the participants and the audience. Additionally, the songs often include blessings for marriage, housewarming ceremonies, and a child's one-month celebration. Notably, there also exist narrative poems in *lục bát* form that are integrated into *Hát Hoa Tình*, such as *Phạm Công – Cúc Hoa*, *Tô Thị*, and *Lương Sơn Bá – Chúc Anh Đài*.

During a fieldwork trip to Thất Khê Town, Tràng Định District, Lạng Sơn Province, we interviewed Meritorious Artisan Phan Thị Diệu, a local *Then* ritual practitioner, who noted: "The name of this folk singing genre implies flirtatious teasing between men and women and carries a romantic nature, making it unsuitable for use in sacred ceremonies." We also had the opportunity to listen to Meritorious Artisan Đoàn Bích Khê perform a song titled *Công mẹ liêng lục – Công mẹ nuôi con*, which was sung as follows:

*Thu thiên vắng dú quặng buồn lai
Cầm bút viết thư bài phác mẹ.*

Translation:

*In autumn, being alone feels deeply sorrowful,
I pick up the pen to write a letter to Mother.*

This example demonstrates that *Hát Hoa Tình*, especially in the context of male-female courtship, often employs the *lục bát* poetic form. Whether in Lạng Sơn or Cao Bằng, the use of poetic structures in lyrical courtship songs remains consistent. When *Hát Hoa Tình* shifts to a more introspective, confessional tone, it tends to adopt the *thất ngôn* (seven-syllable) verse with rhyming schemes.

In addition to the Tày language, many *Hát Hoa Tình* songs incorporate Vietnamese lyrics, often drawing from the *lục bát* or *thất ngôn tứ tuyệt* traditions. This suggests that *Hát Hoa Tình* is not exclusively performed by the Tày people but also by the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) communities who coexist with them. The inclusion of Vietnamese lyrics also resonates with audiences from neighboring countries. For instance, on Xuân Bách's YouTube channel (based in Lạng Sơn), one can find performances of *Hát Hoa Tình* by artisans from Longzhou, China. This reflects the cultural influence of the Tày community and highlights *Hát Hoa Tình* as a product of cultural migration and diffusion. It also demonstrates similarities with other regional folk genres, such as *lượn then* and *lượn ví* found in Bắc Sơn, Bình Gia (Lạng Sơn), and Định Hóa (Thái Nguyên), as well as Eastern Cao Bằng [2, p. 58; 3, p. 25].

A distinctive feature of *Hát Hoa Tình* used in courtship singing among youth is the use of introductory phrases (known as *câu mào đầu*). Typically, these phrases begin with "Em ơi!" (Hey, girl!) for male singers or "Anh ơi!" (Hey, boy!) for female singers, followed by a melodic upward glide of about half a tone at the end of the line to captivate the audience. This stylistic feature is also prevalent in Thạch An District, Cao Bằng Province. For instance, the following lines are performed by artisan Nông Thị Kim from Lê Lợi Commune, Thạch An District:

Male voice:

*Noong ơi!
Up in the sky, there's a blue cloud,
Let me ask, what is your name?*

*Up in the sky, there's a round cloud,
Let me ask, which family are you from?*

Female voice:

Chài ơi!

If only we were silkworms,

Feeding on the same leaf, sleeping on the same tray.

The lyrics are structured to initiate conversation and express a desire to befriend the other, using literary allusions and idiomatic expressions to enhance emotional resonance and demonstrate the performer's cultural literacy.

The evidence presented above affirms that *Hát Hoa Tình* exists in both the Tày and Vietnamese languages. This illustrates that the genre is embraced not only by the Tày and Nùng ethnic groups but also by Vietnamese (Kinh) individuals who have migrated and integrated with local communities. Vietnamese-language *Hát Hoa Tình* songs performed by artisans in Longzhou, China, further exemplify cross-cultural exchange. This linguistic blending suggests a historical pattern of Vietnamese migration to the Northern mountainous regions, followed by cultural assimilation into Tày and Nùng societies. Particularly during the post-Mạc dynasty period, this migration facilitated the convergence of traditional Vietnamese and indigenous cultures, resulting in a unique cultural identity for the Tày and Nùng communities in Lạng Sơn Province, especially in Trảng Định District. Such features highlight the cultural parallels between *Hát Hoa Tình*, *lượn* then of Eastern Cao Bằng [6], and *lượn ví* of Bắc Sơn, Bình Gia (Lạng Sơn), and Định Hóa (Thái Nguyên) [4].

3.2.2. Musical Characteristics

It can be stated that *Hát Hoa Tình* (Hoa Tình Singing) is a form of rhymed singing based on poetic structures, in which the melodies are relatively simple and not overly complex. The musical expression consists of rhythmic spoken verse and sung melodies based on various poetic forms. During performances, the singer emphasizes tonal variations—both low and high pitches—according to the emotional content of the lyrics, resulting in multiple versions of the same song. The improvisational and spontaneous nature of this genre allows for distinctive melodic creativity during the performance of *Hát Hoa Tình*.

The melodic singing component, often referred to as *Ví Hoa Tình*, is characterized by a tender, emotional tone, avoiding abrupt or wide interval leaps as found in *lượn shương* or *sli* singing styles. Notably, *Ví Hoa Tình* exhibits musical features similar to figurative and metaphorical speech, resembling the *chèo* art form and folk songs of the Kinh people in the Northern Delta of Vietnam.

3.2.3. Performance Characteristics

Hát Hoa Tình is performed through various forms such as *hát cuộc* (courtship singing), *hát vặt* (casual singing), and narrative singing, without incorporating dance or dramatic elements. A notable feature of *Hoa Tình* singing lies in its stylistic structure, including solo performance (narrative) and antiphonal duet singing (call-and-response). The genre does not employ polyphony. A distinctive introductory phrase used in *Hát Hoa Tình* is “*Em ơi!*” (Oh dear girl!) for male singers or “*Anh ơi!*” (Oh dear boy!) for female singers. Typically, at the end of these introductory lines, the performers often inflect the melody upwards by a semitone to captivate listeners.

Hát Hoa Tình is commonly performed during gatherings, traditional festivals, and major celebrations. According to local residents, it was once practiced throughout the night by various ethnic groups such as the Tày, Nùng, and Kinh. Additionally, during cultural exchanges between Vietnam and China, *Hát Hoa Tình* was freely expressed and widely performed by participating artists from both nations.

3.3. The Values of *Hát Hoa Tình* Art in Lạng Sơn

3.3.1. Artistic Value

The artistic value of *Hát Hoa Tình* lies in its thematic focus on romantic love, freedom, and the aspiration for happiness. It reflects the emotional desires and longings of individuals in ancient society, where social constraints were prevalent. The antiphonal structure based on the *lục bát* (six-eight) verse form—exchanged between male and female singers—conveys metaphorical meanings without being overly obscure. The typical exclamations “*Noong ơi!*” (Dear girl!) or “*Chài ơi!*” (Dear boy!) enable audiences to immediately recognize the *Hát Hoa Tình* genre.

Musical artistry is demonstrated through both rhythmic speech and melodic singing, enriching the lyrical and musical repertoire. Each thematic element contributes distinctively to the stylistic balance of *Hát Hoa Tình* in Lạng Sơn. A key criterion that enhances the genre’s appeal is that performers not only possess sweet-sounding voices but also excel in improvisation, understand the melodic structure, and have the creativity and adaptability necessary for dynamic performance.

3.3.2. Social Value

Hát Hoa Tình can be regarded as a unique form of antiphonal courtship singing. Beyond its artistic and musical dimensions, it also embodies significant social value. Firstly, it fosters community cohesion. Through singing, strangers connect by sharing emotions, thoughts, and sentiments, evolving into deep friendships or confidants. It also facilitates interaction between performers and audiences, and fosters cultural exchanges between the Vietnamese (Tày, Nùng) and Chinese (Zhuang) ethnic groups. Because *Hát Hoa Tình* expresses authentic emotions, it carries unique cultural values of the Tày people. Despite intercultural influences, each locality and country preserves its distinct and original variations of *Hát Hoa Tình*. This folk genre vividly captures a serene, rustic atmosphere that evokes a sense of drifting through nature, while its deep and melodious quality enchants all who visit Lạng Sơn. When performed in the appropriate cultural context, it deepens mutual understanding and emotional resonance. Such positive interactions serve as a cohesive force, encouraging mutual support and empathy within the community and even between nations, thus mitigating potential conflicts.

3.3.3. Historical Value

Hát Hoa Tình, through its musical characteristics, lyrics, and performance modes based on poetic forms and linguistic expressions, reflects the heritage of traditional art among the Tày ethnic group. It is the product of cultural exchange among ethnic communities and regions, including Thạch An (Cao Bằng), Tràng Định (Lạng Sơn), and certain areas in China where the Zhuang people reside. This cultural convergence is vital for identifying the origins and historical-cultural values of the Tày and Nùng people in these areas. Over time, due to migration and cultural assimilation, the Kinh and other ethnic groups have gradually integrated into the indigenous Tày community. It can be affirmed that *Hát Hoa Tình* in this borderland region has contributed to the

cultural richness and uniqueness of the Tày people in Trảng Định District, Lạng Sơn, making it more diverse and distinct compared to other regions.

3.4. Preserving and Promoting *Hát Hoa Tình* in Contemporary Life

Hát Hoa Tình emerged from the process of cultural exchange between two ethnic groups sharing the same linguistic branch across the Vietnam–China border. Although it is not widely practiced across the entire Tày and Nùng communities of Lạng Sơn Province, this folk singing tradition has attracted considerable attention from local residents living in the border areas of Trảng Định District.

In the past, during traditional festivals, many young men and women participated in *Hát Hoa Tình*, engaging in playful banter, getting acquainted, exchanging sentiments, and expressing romantic feelings. However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to preventive regulations implemented by both neighboring nations, from 2022 onwards, *Hát Hoa Tình* has rarely appeared in Vietnam–China cross-border cultural performances. Youth interaction in marketplaces has significantly declined, and this form of singing is now seldom chosen for public performance, putting it at risk of fading away.

During our fieldwork in Trảng Định (Lạng Sơn) and Thạch An (Cao Bằng), we observed that Trảng Định District still maintains the tradition of antiphonal singing during the *Thông Báo Sáo Slay* Festival. Meanwhile, in Cao Bằng, *Hát Hoa Tình* appears to be more integrated into local festive rituals and activities.

The most evident reality is that *Hát Hoa Tình* has not yet been widely disseminated—even within Lạng Sơn Province itself. This is partly due to the insufficient attention given to the collection and academic research of this folk art. Although there have been several publications on *Hát Hoa Tình*, most are theoretical or focused solely on textual transcription. To date, no comprehensive study or monograph has been dedicated to this musical tradition. In order to preserve and revitalize this unique genre of folk music, we propose the following measures:

+ Not only Lạng Sơn but also Cao Bằng Province must urgently undertake systematic and meticulous research and documentation of *Hát Hoa Tình*, both in terms of lyrical texts and musical components. During our 2023 fieldwork in Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn, local artisans provided us with 56 *Hát Hoa Tình* songs derived from oral tradition. This number is exceedingly limited, especially when considering the extensive repertoire that must have existed not only in Trảng Định and Thạch An but also among the Zhuang communities in Guangxi, China.

+ At present, there is a policy to integrate folk music into school curricula through extracurricular activities. As with *Hát Then* and *Hát Quan Lang*, local artisans should be mobilized to teach *Hát Hoa Tình* by organizing dedicated classes and establishing folk song clubs in districts where this art form is still present. This approach serves as an effective means of cultural heritage preservation, while simultaneously guiding students toward greater appreciation of their ethnic identity. Incorporating *Hát Hoa Tình* into club activities will not only contribute to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also enrich the content of local cultural performances.

+ It is essential to reorganize the performance spaces for *Hát Hoa Tình*. For ethnic minority groups in mountainous areas—especially the Tày and Nùng communities of Lạng Sơn—the marketplace is not merely a venue for trade and economic exchange. It also functions as a cultural space for courtship and social interaction, serving as a foundational setting for the development of intangible cultural expressions within these ethnic communities.

4. CONCLUSION

For the Tày and Nùng communities in Lạng Sơn Province, *Hát Hoa Tình* represents a distinctive form of folk art, deeply embedded with cultural, ideological, linguistic, and historical values unique to these ethnic groups. At present, due to both objective and subjective factors, the art of *Hát Hoa Tình* is facing the risk of being marginalized within the sphere of traditional cultural practices. Without timely and effective preservation efforts, *Hát Hoa Tình* is in danger of disappearing entirely from Vietnam.

Hát Hoa Tình is inherently collective and localized in nature, with a strong element of improvisation, which makes it particularly challenging to memorize and preserve. Notably, *Hát Hoa Tình* once played a vital role in fostering community cohesion through cultural exchanges between Vietnam and China. As a result of this intercultural transmission and adaptation, in a small geographic area, this folk genre facilitated the engagement of Zhuang friends—who share the same Kadai language family—in exploring Vietnamese folk songs and transforming them into their own variations of *Hát Hoa Tình*.

Today's younger generation, although exposed to cultural influences from diverse sources and platforms, often lacks the ability to critically evaluate and appreciate the artistic quality of cultural products. Consequently, a significant portion of youth are gradually distancing themselves from traditional folk music, including that of their own ethnic heritage. This cultural shift explains why *Hát Hoa Tình* in Trảng Định (Lạng Sơn) has yet to gain widespread affection and acceptance among the broader community, and why it has not achieved the same level of popularity as other folk singing traditions.

The existing repertoire of *Hát Hoa Tình* is currently very limited and is becoming increasingly obscure within the daily lives of the Tày people. Hence, there is an urgent need to establish a dedicated group of individuals committed to safeguarding and disseminating this form of folk music.

Not only in Lạng Sơn, but also in Cao Bằng, *Hát Hoa Tình* is on the verge of extinction due to various internal and external factors. Despite its high cultural value, this art form has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention or public promotion. Therefore, it is imperative that artisans, local authorities, and the wider community collectively engage in the preservation and promotion of the unique cultural heritage embodied in *Hát Hoa Tình*. The urgent task at hand is to implement comprehensive efforts in documentation, research, and dissemination in order to protect this exceptional genre of folk singing in the current context.

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